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LIGHT ON THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD<sup>1</sup>

THE so-called Underground Railroad, as a phase of our anti-slavery history, has thus far been subjected to very limited critical study. Henry Wilson speaks of the romantic interest attaching to the mass of incidents which makes up the printed sources on the subject, but for some reason the romance of this theme—not outdone by the reality disclosed by investigation—has been insufficient to attract extended research.

There are only four books dealing specifically with the subject: namely, the *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin; Underground Railroad Records*, by William Still; the *Underground Railroad in Chester and the Neighboring Counties of Pennsylvania*, by R. C. Smedley; and the *Underground Railroad*, by Rev. W. M. Mitchell. An examination of them shows how circumscribed and local in character is the literature upon the subject, and warrants hopes of discovery for the student who has faith and patience enough to keep him collecting the hidden, scattered data. He can scarcely expect to find much in the way of documents and diaries. The legislative restraints upon the rendering of aid to slaves bent on flight to Canada were, of course, very real to the minds of those who pitied the bondsman, whether the well-informed lawyer, like Salmon P. Chase and Joshua R. Giddings, or the illiterate negro whose fellow-feeling was sufficiently sagacious to avoid the open violation of what others might call the law of the land. Written evidence of complicity was for the most part conscientiously avoided, and the occasional tell-tale letter or the rare fragment of a memorandum now to be found, bears unmistakable signs of intended secrecy. The proper names are blotted out, or a cipher is employed. The history of the Underground Railroad must be written, therefore, if it be written at all, out of the recollections of abolitionists as the main source of information.

Underground operations practically ceased with the beginning of the Civil War. In view of the lapse of time, the reason for

<sup>1</sup> This article is a preliminary study. As the writer is still in search of data, he will be glad to correspond with any persons having information on the subject. Address, W. H. Siebert, 40 Shepard Street, Cambridge, Mass.

saying something about the credibility of the evidence upon which our knowledge of the Underground Road must be based is apparent. It is a fact of common observation that old persons ordinarily remember the occurrences of their youth and prime better than events of recent date. The abolitionists, as a class, were people whose remembrances of the ante-bellum days were deepened by the clear definition of their governing principles, the abiding sense of their religious convictions, and the extraordinary conditions—legal and social—under which their acts were performed. The risks these persons ran, the few and scattered friends they had, the concentration of their interests into small compass because of the disdain of the communities where they lived, have secured to us a source of knowledge of which the reliability can scarcely be questioned. If there be a single doubt on this point it must give way before the manner in which statements gathered from different localities during the last four years articulate together, the testimony of witnesses unknown to each other combining to support each other.

The elucidation by new light of some obscure matter already reported, the verification by a fresh witness of some fact already discovered, gives at once the rule and test of an investigation such as this. Out of the many illustrations which might be given I offer one. Having grounds for believing that Portsmouth, Ohio, was one of the initial stations of an underground line of travel, I obtained, by correspondence with Mr. Henry Hall, the mayor of the town, a letter stating that Milton Kennedy and his brother-in-law Joseph Ashton had aided fugitive slaves in that neighborhood, and urging that I visit Portsmouth in order to get fuller information. When, after nineteen months, I got to Portsmouth, Mr. Kennedy was in the West, but I made the acquaintance of an intelligent colored man—a barber, J. J. Minor by name—himself an old-time “agent” of the “road,” who corroborated the report about Mr. Kennedy’s connections with the underground work, and gave a straightforward account of what he called “the regular line” up the Chillicothe pike seven miles, to the houses of two colored men (Dan Lucas and Joseph Love), and thence to a settlement of colored people in Peble township in the north central part of Pike County.

To make even a partial collection of this scattered material has been a long task. During the last four years, in the intervals of respite from teaching, I have gathered some twenty-five hundred written or dictated statements, and have made an effort to visit all the places in the state of Ohio where former employés of the

Underground Railroad could be found. Last year I was able to extend these explorations to southern Michigan, and among the surviving fugitives along the Detroit River in Canada West.

The materials thus collected relate to the following states, viz.: Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Vermont, and Maine, with a few items concerning Delaware, Maryland, and Wisconsin. A casual comparison of the red-line tracings in different states on the map will show the relative extent in the various states of the underground lines of travel thus far unearthed.

Attention is called to several noteworthy points on the map. The first deserving mention is the most striking, viz., the geographical extent of these secret routes to liberty. The region traversed by the paths forms nearly one-quarter of the present area of the Union. The concavity of its irregular crescent shape brought Canadian freedom close enough to attract slaves not merely from the border slave states, but from the Carolinas, Tennessee, and even in rare cases from "the far South." The second point to be noted is the relatively large number of interlaced lines by which Ohio is crossed. The general trend of these is, of course, towards Lake Erie. The explanation of this multitude of fugitive trails through Ohio is a little complex, but the complexity can easily be disentangled. The state's geographical position and the reach of its southern boundary gave it a longer line of contact with slave territory than that possessed by any other state. It bordered Kentucky with some two hundred and seventy-five miles of river frontage and Virginia with a hundred and fifty miles or more. The crossing of this "Jordan" of the slave was made at almost any point where a boat could be found. That the character of the early settlements in Ohio is a factor not to be omitted is proved by the close network of paths which zigzag from Marietta across the Western Reserve to places of deportation on the lake, linking together many little communities where New England ideas prevailed. With Joshua R. Giddings these communities claimed to have borrowed their abolition sentiments from the writings of Jefferson, whose "abolition tract," Giddings said, "was called the Declaration of Independence."<sup>1</sup>

It must not be forgotten in dealing with this comparative showing of Ohio and other states that the energy of this research has been largely confined to Ohio. Perhaps similar lines may be traced in Pennsylvania.

<sup>1</sup> *Life of Joshua R. Giddings*, by George W. Julian, p. 157.

The zigzag character of the routes has just been mentioned. It deserves, perhaps, some emphasis, as also the radiation in frequent cases of several lines from one centre, and the horizontal connections of routes which, roughly speaking, are parallel. This constitutes our third point. The features mentioned are characteristic, and serve to show that the safety of fugitives was never sacrificed by the abolitionists to any thoughtless desire for rapid transit. Zigzag was the sure mode. It was one of the regular devices to blind and throw off pursuit, just as was conveyance after night. In times of special emergency travellers would be switched off from one course to another, or taken back on their track and hidden for days or even weeks, then sent forward again. It can scarcely be doubted that the circuitous land route from Toledo to Detroit was a natural expedient of this kind. Slave-owners and their agents were often known to be on the lookout along the direct thoroughfare between the places named. Notwithstanding the extreme severity of the fugitive slave law of 1850, the number of arrests of persons claimed as fugitives during the five years and eight months after its passage was somewhat more than two hundred.<sup>1</sup> These were the known captures. There may have been many others which never attracted attention. It is highly probable that but few of these are chargeable to the carelessness or cowardice of parties engaged in the underground service.

A fourth point which the map might suggest relates to a few long stretches of road which had apparently no way-stations where the footsore refugee could get rest and food preparatory to the next night's journey. It will be noticed that such sections are drawn as being identical with certain branches of the canal and railway systems of different states. The tow-paths of some of our western canals formed convenient highways to liberty for a considerable number of self-reliant fugitives. A letter of recent date (December 5, 1895), from Bloomfield, Ind., illustrates this fact. The writer (E. C. H. Cavins) states that the Wabash and Erie Canal became a thoroughfare for slaves, who would follow it from the vicinity of Evansville, Ind., until they reached Ohio, probably

<sup>1</sup> "More than two hundred arrests of persons claimed as fugitives were made from the time of the passage of the Bill to the middle of April, 1856. . . . These arrests took place more frequently in Pennsylvania than in any other Northern state. Many fugitives were caught and carried back, of whom we have no account. . . . When arrests to the number of two hundred, at least, can be traced, and their dates fixed, during six years, we may suppose that the Bill was not, as some politicians averred, practically of little consequence." — *Life and Correspondence of Theodore Parker*, by John Weiss, Vol. II. p. 93.

in some instances going as far as Toledo, though usually, as the writer believes, striking off on one or another of several established lines of underground road in central and northern Indiana. The identity of a few of the tracings with the road-beds of the modern type of railway signifies, of course, transportation by rail when the situation would admit of it. Sometimes, when there was not the usual eagerness of pursuit, and when the intelligence or Caucasian cast of the fugitive warranted it, the traveller, with the necessary ticket and instructions, was put aboard the cars for his or her destination. In Illinois the Illinois Central Railroad from Centralia, Marion County, to Chicago was incorporated in the underground service; so also was the Chicago and Rock Island Railroad from Peru, LaSalle County, to the same terminus. The old Mad River Railroad (or Sandusky, Dayton, and Cincinnati Railroad of western Ohio — now a part of the "Big Four" system) bore many dark-skinned passengers from Urbana, if not also from Cincinnati and Dayton, to Lake Erie. In eastern Ohio the Cleveland and Pittsburg Railroad, from Alliance to Cleveland, was much patronized during several years by instructed runaways. Similar benefits were rendered by certain railroads in New England, some of whose officials were abolitionists. The New York, New Haven, and Hartford Railroad and the Vermont Central may be cited as instances.

In the fifth place, attention is asked to the terminals or places of deportation along our northern and northeastern boundary. There were eighteen of these. Of course these ports were not called upon to send to English soil all those who liberated themselves by flight. Doubtless many, many hundreds, little realizing the risks they were taking, settled in the Northern states, in neighborhoods where the presence of Quakers, Wesleyan Methodists, Covenanters, and Free Presbyterians, or people of their own color, gave them the assurance of safety. The disappearance from their accustomed haunts of many of these fugitive settlers in the free states, after the passage of the fugitive slave bill of 1850, and the sudden influx of blacks over the Canadian borders, are two complementary facts whose significance is best seen when they are taken together.

There is one other point graphically displayed, viz., the lines of boat service to the Canada termini. Among the steamboats which plied their traffic on the lakes there were some whose captains were ever ready to give passage to colored emigrants. Captain Willibur of the *Michigan* welcomed a band of fugitives who came aboard his boat at Sandusky, with the greeting: "Well, I

wish all Kentucky was aboard." It frequently happened that both pursuers and pursued would find themselves in company on the same steamer. Under such circumstances, the abolitionist captain chose to touch at some point on the Canadian side, before landing at an American port. The *Illinois*, running between Chicago and Detroit; the *Bay City*, the *Arrow*, and the *Mayflower*, between Sandusky and Detroit; the *Forest Queen*, the *Morning Star*, and the *May Queen*, between Cleveland and Detroit; the *Phæbus*, a little boat plying between Toledo and Detroit, as well as some scows and sail-boats, are among the old crafts of the great lakes held in grateful remembrance by the aged survivors of fugitive slave days in Canada West. Vessels engaged in our coast-wise trade became more or less involved in transporting slaves from Southern ports, for example, from Norfolk and Portsmouth, Va., to the New England coast, sometimes without the knowledge of the shipmaster; sometimes, no doubt, with his connivance, or with the knowledge of his men. North-bound steamboats on the Mississippi and Ohio rivers not infrequently provided the means of escape.

The origin of the Underground Road dates farther back than is generally known, though, to be sure, the different "divisions" of the road were not contemporary in development. A letter of George Washington, bearing date May 12, 1786, gives the first report, so far as I know, of the earliest systematic efforts for the aid and protection of fugitive slaves. He speaks of the case of a certain Mr. Dalby, residing at Alexandria, whose slave has escaped to Philadelphia, and "whom a society of Quakers in the city, formed for such purposes, have attempted to liberate."<sup>1</sup> From the beginning of 1800, if not in the preceding decade, we may safely regard as continuous the record of Philadelphia as a centre of active sympathy with the fugitive slave. New Jersey engaged in the cause of immediate emancipation nearly, if not quite, as early. The work in Ohio and the adjoining states appears to have commenced at least as far back as 1816-1817. The first known case of the despatching of a fugitive from Chicago to Canada occurred in 1839, and the befriending of Missouri chattels in southeastern Iowa began in this same year. The New England states are also known to have had "regular stations" — as the places of concealment were called — by this time. The Underground Railroad, then, had grown into a wide-spread "institution" before the year 1840, and in several states it had existed during

<sup>1</sup> Sparks's *Washington*, IX. 158, quoted in *Quakers of Pennsylvania*, by Dr. A. C. Applegarth, Johns Hopkins Studies, X. 463.

previous decades. This statement coincides with the findings of Dr. Samuel G. Howe in Canada, while on a tour of investigation there, in 1863. He reports that the arrivals of runaway slaves in the Dominion "were at first very rare, . . . but" that "they increased early in the century. . . ." He continues that "some [of the fugitives], not content with personal freedom and happiness, went secretly back to their old homes, and brought away their wives and children at much peril and cost. . . . Hundreds," he says, "trod this path [referring to the Underground Road] every year, but they did not attract much public attention."<sup>1</sup> It does not escape Mr. Howe's consideration, however, that the fugitive slaves in Canada were soon brought into public notice by the diplomatic negotiations between England and the United States during the years 1826-1828, the object of those negotiations being—as Mr. Clay, the Secretary of State, himself declared—"to provide for a growing evil." The evidence gathered from surviving abolitionists in the states adjacent to the lakes shows an increased activity of the Underground Road during the period 1830-1840. The reason for flight, given by the slave, was in the great majority of cases the same, viz., fear of being sold to the far South. It is certainly significant in this connection, that the decade above mentioned witnessed the removal of the Indians from the Gulf states and, in the words of another contemporary observer and reporter, "the consequent opening of new and vast cotton fields." This observing person continues aptly: "Since 1840, the high price of slaves may be supposed . . . to have increased the vigilance and energy with which the recapture of fugitives is followed up, and to have augmented the number of free negroes reduced to slavery by kidnappers. Indeed, it has led to a proposition being quite seriously entertained in Virginia, of enslaving the whole body of the free negroes in that state by legislative enactment."<sup>2</sup> The swelling emphasis laid upon the value of their escaped slaves by the Southern representatives in Congress, and by the South generally, resounded with terrific force at length, in the fugitive slave law of 1850. That act did not, as it appears, check or diminish in any way the number of underground rescues. In spite of the exhibit on fugitive slaves made in the United States census report for 1860, it is difficult to doubt the consensus of testimony of many underground agents, so-called, to the effect that

<sup>1</sup> *The Refugees from Slavery in Canada West*, Report to the Freedman's Inquiry Commission, by S. G. Howe, 1864, pp. 11, 12.

<sup>2</sup> G. M. Weston, in his *Progress of Slavery in the United States*, Washington, D.C., 1858, pp. 22, 23.



**"UNDERGROUND"  
ROUTES TO CANADA**  
SHOWING THE LINES OF TRAVEL  
OF FUGITIVE SLAVES.  
W. H. SIEBERT, 1898.





the decade from 1850-1860 was the period of the road's greatest activity in all sections of the North.

How great may have been the loss sustained by slave-owners through the hidden channels of escape I cannot now undertake to estimate. But I am constrained to say that those who compiled the statistics on fugitive slaves in the United States census compendiums for 1850 and 1860 seem not to have secured the facts in full. These compendiums show a marked decline of the slave population in the border slave states during the decade intervening; still more, they show a greater percentage of decline in the northernmost counties of these states than in the states as a whole; and, what is even more remarkable, the loss is a little greater during this time in the four "pan-handle" counties of Virginia than in any of the states referred to, or in the border counties of any one of them. It is natural that there should be great variation among the guesses made as to the total number of those indebted for liberty to the Underground Road. To add another guess would be only increasing the uncertainty. There were very, very few of the persons who harbored runaways indiscreet enough to keep a register of their hunted visitors. Their hospitality was equal to all possible demands, but it was none the less meant to be kept strictly secret. Under these circumstances one should handle all numerical generalizations with caution.

What one usually gets from the aged man who endured hazards and ill-repute for conscience' sake is an account of a small number of peculiar or stirring cases which came within his observation; for example, hairbreadth escapes of fugitives from recapture, the successful flight of a slave family, or of an octoroon girl, and so forth. Aside from such data one gets sometimes a pretty definite impression of the frequency of the trips made over one or another route, and even, in rare instances, a positive statement as to the number sheltered in a single household or a certain locality during a more or less limited period.

By rare good luck I happen to have found one leaf of a diary kept by a Friend or Quaker of Alum Creek Settlement, Delaware County, Ohio, which gives a record of the blacks passing through his neighborhood during an interval of five months,—from April 14 to September 10, 1844. The number he gives is forty-seven. The year in which this memorandum was made may be fairly taken as an average year and the line on which this Quaker settlement was a station as a representative underground route in Ohio. Now along Ohio's southern border there were the initial stations of at least twelve important lines of travel, some of which were

certainly in operation before 1830. Let us consider, as we may properly, that the period of operation continued from 1830 to 1860. Taking these as the elements for a computation, one discovers that Ohio alone must have aided not less than 40,000 fugitives in the thirty years included in our reckoning. By actual count it is found that the number of persons within Ohio, named as underground workers in the collections upon which this paper is largely based, is 1076. It is proper to observe that this figure is a minimum figure. Death and infirmity, as well as removal, have carried many unknown operators beyond the chance of discovery.

One other illustration of underground activity may here be ventured. Mr. Robert Purvis, of Philadelphia, states that he kept a record of the fugitives who passed through the hands of the Vigilance Committee of Philadelphia for a long period, till the trepidation of his family after the passage of the fugitive slave bill in 1850 caused him to destroy it. His record book showed, he says, an average of one a day sent northward. In other words, between 1835 and 1860 over 9000 runaways were aided in Philadelphia. But we know that the Vigilance Committee did not inaugurate this sort of work in the Quaker City, and that underground activities there date back at least to the time of Isaac T. Hopper's earliest efforts, that is, 1800 and before.

In bringing together the testimony presented in this paper, I have kept myself to original sources, and have quoted eye-witnesses only. The limitations of space prevent my saying aught of the concurrent or indirect results of the Underground Road and its workings. Its operations constantly produced aggravation in the South, and the pursuit of passengers, mobs, and violence were results widely witnessed in the North. In just this way many Northern men received their first impression of the abomination of slavery. Such object lessons made abolitionists rapidly, and more aggravation on both sides was the consequence. Thus for years the fugitive slave was a missionary in the cause of freedom. What he could accomplish under favorable circumstances is seen in the impression he produced on the thoughts of a lady who was herself an agent of the Underground Railroad, — Mrs. Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

WILBUR H. SIEBERT.

